

Desert community depleting its water supply | Anza-Borrego trouble, suggestions aired

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Abstract:

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Borrego Valley residents, small businesses, golf courses, resorts and farmers pump an estimated 22,300 acre-feet a year out of the aquifer, according to county studies. Of that, 70 percent is used by agriculture, 20 percent goes to golf courses, and 10 percent is used by residents and commercial interests.

Because these agricultural businesses own their wells and have resisted the county's attempts to monitor their water use, no one knows exactly how much water is being pumped from the aquifer. [Dennis Dickinson] said of the 4,000 acres farmed in Anza-Borrego, only 13 percent is locally owned.

Full Text:

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The Anza-Borrego Desert community is in danger of going to the well one too many times. The area's natural underground supply is being tapped beyond its means, and radical changes must be made to save it.

That was the message the county Planning Commission heard yesterday as from Anza-Borrego residents, county staff and agriculture representatives, who talked about the depletion of the aquifer -- the underground water-bearing layer -- and offered suggestions to restore water levels to normal.

"We don't need any more studies," said John Peterson, county water geologist.

Several tests of the aquifer, Peterson said, show that water levels are declining faster than they can be replenished by rain and mountain runoff.

The aquifer is essentially operating on a deficit, Peterson said. Since it cannot naturally refill itself, well operators have to dig deeper for water, adding to costs to pump and purify. This also adds to the water deficit.

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Estimates of the aquifer's size range between 1.7 million acre-feet and 4 million acre-feet. At current use patterns, Peterson said, the supply would last about 100 years. An acre-foot is 326,000 gallons.

Thomas Weber, the Borrego Water District's general manager, said if the community's present rate of use continues, half of the aquifer's supply of good-quality water will be gone in

35 years. Wells on the town's south side already have been abandoned because they've been tapped out.

"We've done the best we can," Weber said.

The situation has gotten so desperate that residents, farmers, businesspeople and religious representatives have formed an interest group to draw attention to the water debate. The Save Our Aquifer Coalition, or SOAC, sent several members to yesterday's meeting to offer its take on the matter.

"We view this as an extremely urgent situation," said member Dennis Dickinson.

The group would like to see agriculture drastically cut its use of water in the valley.

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Members of the coalition said the agriculture industry's economic benefit to the area is minimal because most of the laborers who work the land are bused in from Escondido, Temecula and Valley Center.

Dickinson said his group would like to see an ordinances enacted or enforced to address water and air quality, closer monitoring of grading by farmers, and a plan to end the water deficit.

"We're all in the basin together," said Eric Larson, head of the Farm Bureau of San Diego County. "Farmers are ready to participate in finding a solution."

Farmers contend their effect on ground water supplies is exaggerated because research is not taking into account water that returns to the aquifer through agricultural runoff and septic system percolation.

Larson said farmers are worried about being left out of the problem-solving process. He said farmers are also wary of a rumored plan to create a pumping tax. The money from the tax would be used to purchase farm land and leave it fallow.

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Credit: STAFF WRITER
